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ABSTRACT

Successful library programs depend on understanding the communication process. A schematic representation of information disseminstion could be used to resolve communication problems by eliminating confusing messages. Because communication can never be perfect, there is a need for a communication specialist to develop public relations with the library staff and patrons. (DS/PF)

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doves on the roof or twenty thousand dollars: the transfer of meaning

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"If you were to say to the grown-ups: 'I saw a beautiful house made of rosy brick, with geraniums in the windows and doves on the roof,' they would not be able to get an idea of that house at all. You would have to say to them: 'I saw a house that cost $20,000.' Then they would exclaim: 'Oh, what a pretty house that is!' "

. . . *The Little Prince*
Antoine de Saint-Exupery

The word "communication" is open to innumerable interpretations. In its most elemental, basic definition — the transfer of meaning — and the use of that "meaning" in a library context, communication can be seen as a process which is involved in a variety of situations. The present, rather parochial, view held by some library practitioners that communication is a simple matter of doing a bit of promotion, installing some machines, or providing media is both inept and inaccurate when communication is considered in light of its sweeping and fundamental role in all human relations. The current economic situation lends itself to detailed analysis and measurement of all library operations.[1] One element, however, that the authors believe is missing from these analyses is the application of measurement in communication and interpersonal relations, such as sociometry, organizational, and dyadic diagnosis.

In order to understand communication dialogues with actual as well as potential clients of libraries, it is useful for us to examine a model of the communication process. A dissemination circle for information has been developed by the authors as an amplification of existing models of the communication process.[2] The charting of the "transfer of meaning" led to the selection of a circle as the basic schematic frame in order to accommodate such factors as continuous repetition, assignment of equal weight to all components, interchangeable role of elements and role rotation probabilities. Indeed, when one considers the importance of the circle as a symbol in all societies and cultures in history, the circle appears to be a logical symbol for the expression of the need to be communicated with as well as the right to communicate. It is the human being as the primary vehicle for communication in responding to these basic needs and rights that causes difficulties, problems, and complications which are the attendant miseries of meaning transfer. One way to examine the elements of the dissemination circle is to apply it to a real life situation and explore the facets which make interpersonnel relations and communication the complex interchange that it is.

In order to illustrate the dynamic nature of this communication process, a simulated experience has been developed in the form of a two-part case study. The analysis of the case study reveals the elements of communication (the transfer of meaning) applied in a

[1] For example: Ernest DeProspo, Ellen Altman, and Kenneth Beasley. *Performance Measures for Public Libraries* (Chicago, American Library Association, 1973).

[2] Examples of such models include those by Shannon-Weaver, Berlo, Miller, Dance, Ross, Barnlund, Galvin, and Leary. An introduction to these models appears in: Alton Barbour and Alvin Goldberg. *Interpersonal Communication, Teaching Strategies and Resources* (Urbana, Ill.: ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills, 1974).

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typical library situation, using the dissemination circle as the vehicle of exegesis.

A Case of Communication

A planning session for an emphasis program was in process in the board room of the Nile Public Library's main branch.

"When we selected nutrition as one of the themes to use this year," commented John Lincoln, coordinator of children's services, "I thought it would be one of the easier ideas to carry out. I forgot that everybody has such decided opinions about it and that everybody's opinions are so different."

"I think one of the problems is that it's really a very large subject to try to tackle like this," said Bob Fargo, head of the library's largest branch. "I think all we can do is just try to do thorough coverage. We want to get people interested in the subject and get them into the library to use materials on nutrition."

"Well, I know that's so," said John, "but in a way it's a shame we set a guideline of no more than six weeks for each of the emphasis programs. We could spend a whole year easily on this one."

"For subject exploration, of course, but I think even the staff — not to mention the public! — would be a bit overcome and bored with nutrition if we spent a whole year on it."

"Let's get back to concrete ideas for programs and publicity," suggested the director who was chairing the meeting. "John, you said that you were all set for a program?"

"Yes, I'm having a combination program . . . short film and a great puppet show based on good eating habits. I've seen the group that does the puppets before, and they're terrific. Puppets always seem to go over big with the children, too."

"How about adults?"

"I've been negotiating with the owner of the Health Plus Food Store," replied Mike Hingham, the young adult coordinator. "Teenagers are very interested in health foods and vegetarian diets."

"But if you do that," objected John, "shouldn't you present the other side? Maybe get a doctor or a nutritionist?"

"The health food people don't seem to want an open confrontation in public," he answered. "I did suggest it, but the owner of the store wants to do the whole program himself. I did say that we'd have booklists and library materials around which might not agree with what he said, but he said that would be okay."

"I don't see anything wrong with it, anyhow," said Kay Thomas, head of the smaller branch library. "It's a great idea, and people need to listen to authorities in the food field. But you've all heard me talk about this before, I know." There were slight smiles from the others, since all had listened to her speak vehemently on behalf of health foods, Adele Davis books and the importance of various vitamins and minerals.

"What are you planning for the inner city reading centers, Nancy," the director asked the Neighborhood Services Librarian.

"I was thinking about developing a slide deck on nutrition, stressing basic nutrition facts. A lot of the children are sensitive about their family's food habits because of teasing at school. In reality, it's not all that bad. Soul cooking, for example is just country-style eating to my way of thinking, and it's probably better nutritionally than some of the so-called 'American' eating patterns."

"How about something on food scares? You know, mercury in swordfish and cancer in cranberries?"

"Offhand I can't see a program there," said the Director, David Erin, "but we haven't decided on whether or not to use any of our television time for this yet." Nile had cable television and the library had been allocated three hours a week for programming, in addition to publicity spots at other times.

"Is there any chance of getting additional time? We've got our time heavily booked for the next six months," commented Pat Michaels, the public information officer. "I wish we could have more time on a regular basis, anyhow."

"I think it's doubtful right now," replied the director. "You know that there are going to be special hearings coming up soon on city government. I doubt if we can get more time now. But maybe we don't need anything special in the way of a television program since there's that program on health on public television."

"I've already developed some promotion spots for television and one of them is a take-off of that program. The other promotion materials are under control and as soon as program plans are definite we'll go ahead on them. Are the extra nutrition library materials ordered?"

"Yes, and most of them have been received. I'd say we have things well in hand at this point."

Two months later an evaluation session for the nutrition emphasis program at Nile Public was held.

The same individuals who had been present at the planning session were in attendance.

"What's the verdict on this one?" asked Bob Fargo. The nutrition program had been the fourth in the year's series.

"Over all, graded on a scale from one to ten, I'd say about six point five," said the director. "We've done better in the past and I think we need to review what went well and what didn't seem to go right. John, do you want to start?"

"Start with failure first? I was really irritated when I read in the papers that the puppet show people put on exactly the same show in several of the schools the week before they did it here. I think they were dishonest not to tell us about it."

"Well, they do the shows for us at a cut-rate fee. You can't expect them to speak up about something that might loose them a job, no matter how small the fee. Did you work with the schools in advance about the children's program on nutrition?"

"I didn't talk to them before the planning, no," John admitted. "We did send them flyers on the program, though, didn't we?" he asked the public information officer.

"Yes, but the schools concerned may not have gotten the flyers at all. We depend on the Board of Education's internal delivery system for things like this, and we've discovered that it's not always terribly efficient."

"It still wasn't as bad as that scathing newspaper editorial we got over Professor Kingsley's talk on nutrition and world hunger. We had no idea Kingsley was going to get into the issue of triage. I'm afraid our conservative, religious community just isn't ready to accept such theories, even though the professor is a noted authority in the field and there was that cover article in the *New York Times* not so long ago on the subject."

"My nomination for the biggest failure was that program by that strange group from out-of-state promoting food rituals and enriching by prayer. That was really weird."

"We were trying to show just some of the various things connected with food and nutrition. But as usual, the library was assumed to be espousing every single viewpoint expressed. Remember Mrs. Schomberg's expression when the one priest, or whatever you call them, tried to get her to join him in a celebration to the glories of lentils?"

"I suppose, too, we should probably keep the board of trustees members better informed. Reginald Hallett was extremely upset by both of these programs and said that he found it difficult in his position as pastor of one of our leading churches to be on the library board at a time when the library was sponsoring such controversial programs."

"The slide deck on nutrition provoked a sizeable number of phone calls. The audio was in English and the voice was a trifle didactic, to say the least."

"The pictures were good. I did like the close-up shots."

"To look on the positive side," said Mike, "the health food program generated a lot of interest. Too bad so much of it was negative."

"Attendance at all programs was down. Our publicity was good, so I don't think we can blame it on that. How did the nutrition library materials move?"

"Some, quite well, but it's always a fairly popular topic. We didn't have enough Spanish language materials and we did buy too many copies of some titles. The scientific things just don't move."

"You know," said Mike, "we thought that television series would help give our programs a push, but maybe it worked in reverse. Those programs are technically so good and well presented that our amateur efforts can't really compete. Or it might be that it was just too much and that people had all they wanted on nutrition."

"We may not have tackled it from the right approach, either. Several people commented to me that they would have rather had some more programs on consumer aspects, good food for less money. The sort of thing we did with the butcher demonstrating economical cuts of meat."

"But we got flack on that program, too. Several supermarket owners complained that we were showing favoritism to one chain over another."

"The telephone survey that the friends group did was interesting, I thought," said the public information officer. "Of course, it wasn't anything terribly comprehensive on the order of a major marketing survey, but it did point out that even though most people in town think the library's just fine, there's just about nothing we can do — including programs on nutrition — that will bring them in here."

"Our perpetual problem, positive apathy," said the director. "Any other comments on the nutrition program before we move on to the next emphasis program?"

"Just one more thing. We probably should have asked someone to speak from the local consumer bureau. We sometimes forget the other city departments when we're planning things like this."

"A good point," said the director. "Perhaps our next emphasis program will give us some techniques for picking up all the vibrations we need." He consulted the list of previously determined subjects for the year. "Are you ready for the occult?"

Analysis of the Case

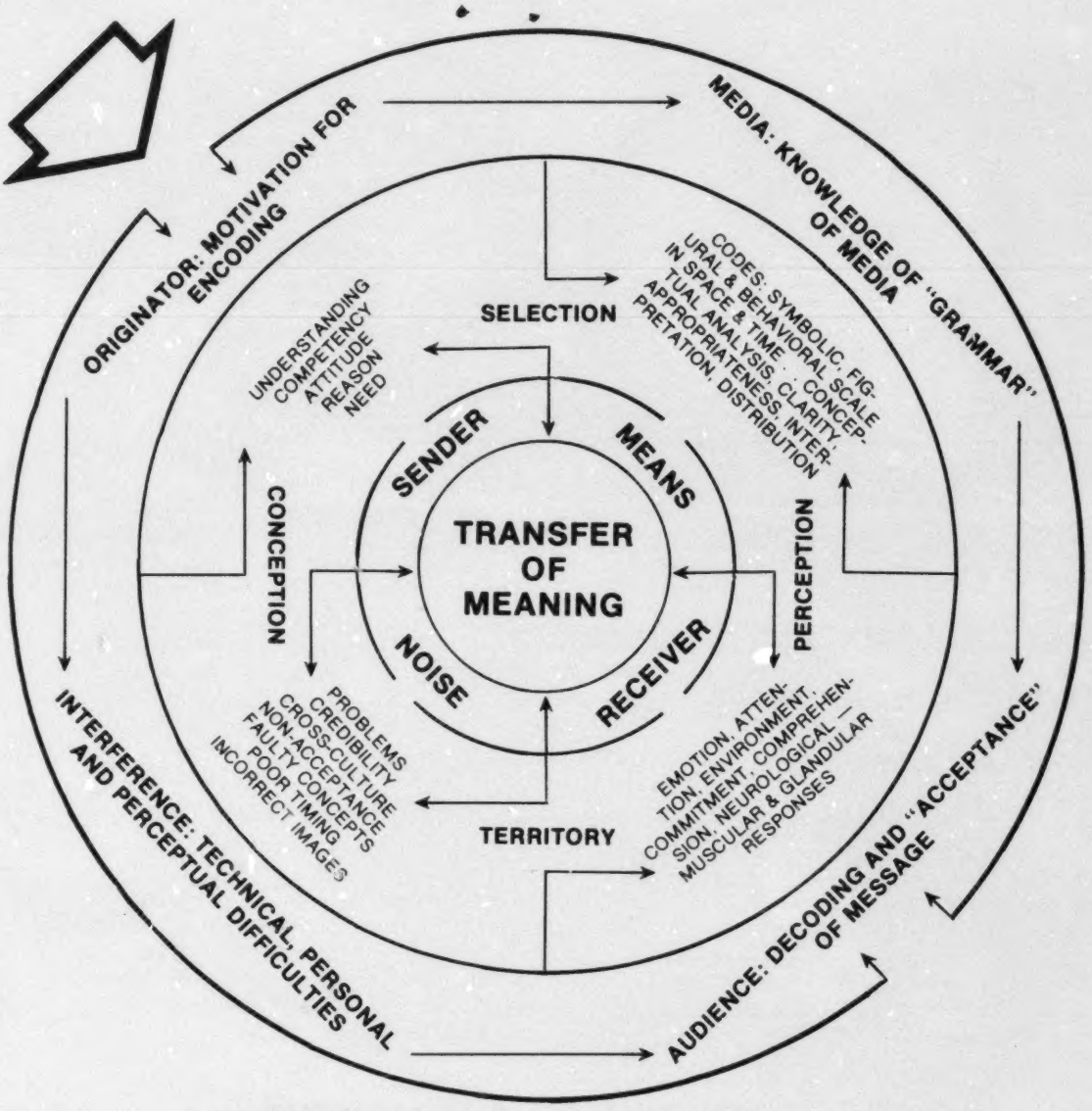
The situation described in "A Case of Communication" should be familiar to all librarians. It is this commonality of experience which brings us back to the universality of the communication process. Whether or not analysis of everyday situations can bring immediate "improvement" cannot be stated, but certainly an understanding of the process of communication and what the various elements are can be very helpful in any sincere efforts to improve staff involvement, patron relations, personnel matters, administrative feedback, and general sensitivity to human needs. The case used as an example is placed in the setting of staff interpersonal relations, but the matter under discussion involves patron relations and patron needs. In other words, people are involved.

On the outer rim of the dissemination circle there are two breaks; one at the point of origination and the other at the point of destination. From one point to the other it is necessary to pass through media (or means) and interference (or noise). For example, a communication need was motivated by the desire of the library staff to increase public awareness of library materials and services. The vehicle for achieving this objective was a series of emphasis programs. Each program, in turn, (if we are to judge by the nutrition program) involved an umbrella of public relations, program activities, and community involvement. These processes were the way in which the library highlighted or emphasized by means of special activities just one subject area in which the library had information and materials. In reaching the intended audience, both users and nonusers of the library, a variety of difficulties cropped up; misinterpretation of aims, lack of planning and checking with other agencies and schools, suspicion of motives and some lack of understanding on the part of both library staff members and the audience. At the receiving end of the cycle is the hapless audience which is bombarded with a variety of messages in various ways. The individual's receptiveness to all this, and how to measure it, is stressed in the second half of the case. In addition to these factors are the fields or territories of the quartiles; selection, conception, territory, and perception. These four items emphasize again the *human* part of communication and introduce the idea that no diagram of communication can be clear-cut and static without including "grey" areas which merge and flow into each other. The inner circle outlining the transfer of meaning is broken at the noise section of the larger circle. And with good reason. For in analysis and examination of any communication process this is the area most often dissected and concentrated on for error and poor results.

The ultimate goal, the center of the "target" is perfect communication — the transfer of meaning. In all honesty and refined to its finest point, communication is not and never can be perfect. But it is possible to strive for perfection, at least betterment, even knowing that perfection is an unobtainable goal.

A number of communication complications are present in the case example. The entire idea of interchange for clarification and a better understanding presents the phase of the dissemination circle of mirror image and revolution. Any communication can be simply described from sender to receiver, but when the original receiver becomes a sender and gives a message back to the original sender, each step of the entire process becomes either clearer or cloudier as it passes through means and noise, depending on the various components concerned. This is in itself a difficult process to investigate when two individuals are having a conversation. When one "removed" group — the library staff making decisions about the emphasis programs — is attempting to touch base with another "removed" group — public users and nonusers — the situation becomes increasingly difficult to interpret over such things as motivation, acceptance, reaction, and change in habits or values as a result of a positive reception of a message meant to reach a formerly unresponsive individual. In other words, making a user out of a nonuser.

The two sections of the circle which provide the two most talked about areas for communication control and means and noise. The selection of the manner in which a message is sent is ordinarily considered means or media, but when faulty communication occurs, the interference factors come into play. The library staff in its efforts to present selections of programs which would cover a wide variety of views on nutrition ended up with some adverse comments and criticisms because of a number of things, such as preparation of suitable individuals, possibly poor selection of programs, manner in which the ideas were presented. A program dealing with triage would appear to be perfectly acceptable, but was more than controversial in this apparently reactionary community. A reactor panel after Kingsley's presentation might have staved off some of the criticism and would at least have given the library staff the defense that other opinions had been presented to disagree or refute the nutrition expert's views. The provision of the slide deck on nutrition for the inner city libraries offended some people in the community. The "means" used was the audio/slide presentation, but its execution was less than adequate. If the staff had



DISSEMINATION CIRCLE FOR INFORMATION

c. Jane A. Hannigan
Cosette Kies 1974

provided the audio portion in Spanish and if they had not confused the target audience for the presentation, a transfer of meaning might have occurred. Clarity and appropriateness as translated in the medium of an audio/slide presentation clashed with cross-cultural heritages and incorrect images.

It is perhaps that means and noise can be more readily diagnosed for failure and success which has resulted in the concentration of examination in these two areas. Communication problems dealing with the sender and the receiver involve psychological, educational, environmental, and physiological background and needs.

Understanding of the communication process and its application is necessary to some degree in all of us, and certainly any institution which deals with public service such as the library requires a deeper understanding of this human process. Sensitivity training, encounter groups and transactional analysis have become popular over the last decade, but these are merely techniques for dealing with the overall process of communication. As library staffs

become larger and more specialized with systems analysts, budget officer, personnel managers, and the like, a communications officer needs to be included as a staff member in such organizational structures. Such a person would be responsible not only for public relations and dealings with clients, but also for continuing education of the library staff.

The professional education of these communications specialists could be compared to the early days of the development and training of media programmers. The common assumption that an audiovisual specialist automatically could become a media specialist has proved erroneous. It should not be considered that a communications specialist can be automatically developed from functions already included in the library's program, such as public relations and media technology. Special determination of appropriate competencies and experiences need to be designed for this new specialty. At the same time, insistance on inclusion of general communication processes and techniques in the library education of all professionals needs strong consideration.

In our constant struggle to meet client needs and extend library services to nonusers, the application of communication principles could well become valuable to all of us in planning and executing improved and more meaningful library services. The dissemination circle will not, of course, answer all needs and solve all problems. However, it has great promise in providing a frame of reference or schema for the analysis of communication problems in a library situation.